

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Artificial Intelligence 171 (2007) 1124–1126

Artificial
Intelligencewww.elsevier.com/locate/artint

Book review

Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-13436-5, 2005.

Yusuf Pisan

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Available online 10 October 2007

```
examine chronometer
examine socks
look
go west
examine peak
go south
```

[Typical user typed commands in IF]

People are natural storytellers; computers much less so. Interactive Fiction (IF) is a unique collaboration among the author who composes the story, the computer that simulates the fictional world, and the interactor who explores and modifies the world through text-based commands. Although the possible endings are preordained by the author, the interactor is free to choose her own path. The pleasure of IF is in the balance of reading the story, interacting with the world, and solving the puzzles.

IF works crafted by talented authors go beyond games, and should be treated as pieces of literary fiction. As such, IF is part of the electronic literature movement along with hypertext fiction, chatterbots, email, text messaging based novels, computer generated poems, and collaborative writing projects. All of these forms are reaching out to the larger community for wider acceptance and recognition.

Montfort's recent book *Twisty Little Passages* is a valuable resource both as historical exploration of the origins of IF and reinforcement of IF's position as a valid form of electronic literature. It is interesting to note that although IF and hypertext fiction share the same desire to give the reader a sense of control over how events unfold, hypertext fiction has received some attention in literary and academic circles while IF has been pushed aside. With *Twisty Little Passages*, Montfort positions IF as a piece of electronic literature with roots in literature. He also offers a new perspective from which to examine IF: the riddle.

Making up and telling riddles have a long history, almost as long as storytelling itself. By placing the riddle as a direct antecedent to IF, Montfort provides a new way to think about the form. He uses this model to explore the aesthetics and poetics of IF works as they exist today. IF works, much like riddles, describe the worlds in atypical ways, present challenges to be solved, and require creative thinking. Instead of a riddler that might offer clues, IF offers a simulated world that the interactor can probe for hints.

The crux of IF is the challenge. Make it too easy or too linear, and the work is no different than a piece of hypertext: the interactor simply travels the well-defined path set out before her. The story and the writing may still be beautiful, but the effortless cruising and consumption of the story misses out on what IF can offer. When the challenges are too

E-mail address: ypisan@it.uts.edu.au.

hard, the interactor remains stuck in the first room, examining and re-examining objects, unable to find the hint that will advance the plot.

Setting up challenges of the right difficulty is an art. Unfortunately, because not all IF authors have mastered this crucial skill, IF works differ significantly in quality. Commercial computer games address this problem through extensive user testing and fine-tuning before releasing the product. Journals rely on peer review; publishers act as filters for books in deciding what to market. In comparison, the IF community is tiny and lacks publication quality control. IF works, good and bad alike, are often compiled and remain undifferentiated in archives. Consequently, when a newcomer to IF randomly selects a work, there is no telling whether she will be bored, frustrated, or filled with joy. The community needs new ideas to grow and masterpieces to draw in new talent. While the yearly Interactive Fiction Competition attempts to fix this problem, the number of pieces submitted to the competition remain small.

IF is more than just a series of puzzles; it is a simulated world. As such, literary machines—machines that generate text—are part of IF's ancestry. Montfort describes how programs such as ELIZA/DOCTOR and SHRDLU influenced the early IF authors. He discusses how text generation systems such as *I Ching* and Lull's machine were precursors to IF, although these works may not have been known to early IF authors. IF authors were also moulded by Tolkien-inspired Dungeons and Dragons, the multiplayer video game *Maze*, and the text-only quiz game *Trivia* on ARPANet. These antecedents shaped the first templates for IF which many others have pursued.

Montfort describes in detail the first IF work, *Adventure*, authored by Crowther in 1975, to share his caving experiences with his daughters in a fantasy setting. *Adventure* was followed by many look-alikes, including *Zork* which later became a trilogy and the basis for the commercial company Infocom. For readers who have played *Adventure*, *Zork*, and other Infocom games, reading the historical background is an exploration deeper into the IF cave. Montfort's thorough analysis of the MIT subculture, including jokes embedded in *Zork* and other games, peels back another layer and provides ample evidence to demonstrate the richness of these works.

Infocom represents not only the brief commercial success of IF, but the raising of the quality bar for IF. At Infocom's peak, talented authors collaborated to produce some of the best IF works to date. The company's creative team fine-tuned the challenges and expanded the types of stories that could be told in IF. Montfort offers intriguing examples: *A Mind Forever Voyaging* is a science fiction work exploring a dystopian society; *Infidel* presents an anti-hero; and *Deadline* is a detective mystery.

Twisty Little Passages makes an excellent case for the importance of IF in the history of more recent computer games. By the end of 1980s, Infocom had stopped producing text-only IF works and text-and-graphics-based interactive fiction was on the rise. The commercial success of *Mystery House* led the way to graphics-only stories. IF works based on books, such as *The Hobbit*, *Robots of Dawn* and *The Mist*, provided readers with additional experiences in the simulated worlds, much like today's video games that leverage from Hollywood blockbusters.

The link between IF and computer games extends to the development of MUDs (Multiple User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUD Object Oriented). The first MUD was derived from a hacked-up version of *Zork* named *Dungeon*. Text-based adventure games led the way to graphical adventures, as well as to early role playing games paving the way towards today's large MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer On-Line Role Player Games such as Everquest and World of Warcraft). Adult-oriented, commercially-driven text adventures are also part of IF's legacy. *Softporn Adventure* produced by Sierra On-Line inspired the successful *Leisure Suit Larry* series, which still continues to this day as a cell phone game.

Montfort is hesitant to make any predictions for the future of IF, whether it will be a pleasant hobby or come to be appreciated as meaningful art in its own right. Although some IF works do raise feelings of awe and admiration, explore political issues, or offer transformative experiences, most IF works, as Montfort readily admits, are "... written for a small group of people already familiar with the form, and the main, if not the only concern is whether that group quickly finds such works enjoyable" (p. 229). IF has been one of the catalysts for research into interactive narrative. We now have better natural language parsers, better understanding of user interaction, many more CPU cycles to simulate much larger worlds, and even story managers that can monitor the user and modify the story dynamically. Once tools for non-programmers become available, we may experience an explosion in second generation IF stories.

For readers who have experienced IF, *Twisty Little Passages* is an absorbing historical expedition. As the most comprehensive historical survey to date, the book will inspire readers already familiar with the genre to explore available IF archives and play old games with new appreciation and enthusiasm.

However, for those who are not part of the in-group, playing an IF work can be time-consuming and frustrating. Most people lack the necessary IF-oriented literacy that will get them flowing through the story. In IF, the controls are

text-based commands based on a subset of English. Unravelling the language is an important part of the experience. For gamers who are used to well-defined controls, this represents an unexpected, and often unwelcome, challenge. Even when this barrier is overcome, the reward of progressing through a text-based story pales in comparison to the theatrical multimedia experiences gamers have become used to. For typical book readers who are not fond of riddles, IF puzzles become obstacles that get in the way of a good story, making it difficult to turn this group into IF fans.

For those who have never experienced IF, *Twisty Little Passages* opens a door. Even if they never interact with an IF work, they can read about its beauty, learn about the early vibrant days of text-based computer games, and understand the fertile origins of current computer games.

For readers who are pursuers of electronic literature, the book is an important resource, the best of its kind for IF. These readers owe to themselves and to the electronic literature movement to understand the history of IF and experience critical IF works that have shaped this literature form.

Overall, *Twisty Little Passages* provides a much-needed critical history of interactive fiction. Whether it is sufficient to energize the genre and create a path to the future remains to be seen.